

# the Bold Italic

SAN FRANCISCO

## Bye Forever to the Office. Hello, Drop-In ‘Collaboration Spaces.’

What to expect when we get to see our co-workers again



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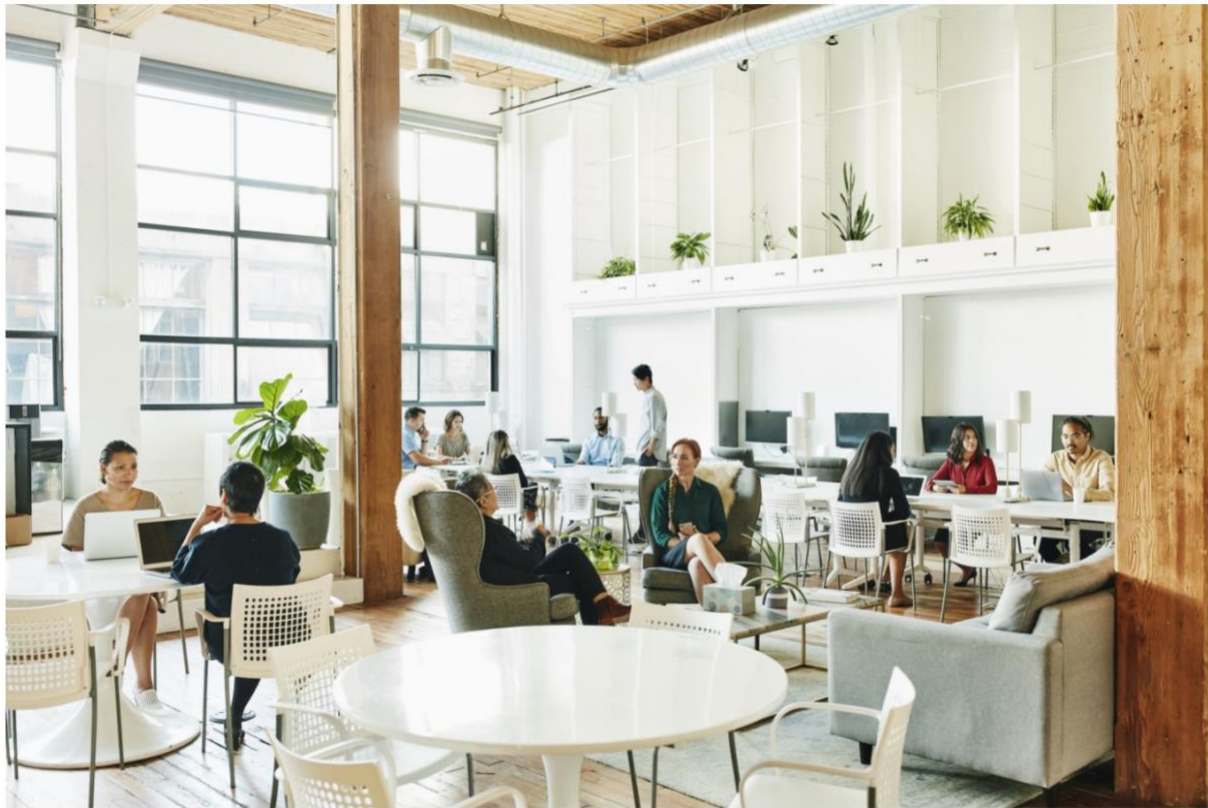


Photo: Thomas Barwick/DigitalVision/Getty Images

Downtown San Francisco's existence today is a shell of the life it previously lived.

It used to be: Traffic. Noise. People rushing to the office, to BART, out for food, all running past each other, often into each other, buried in their phones. I'd frequent the streets of the Financial District often to work from the now-fallen Wing co-working space, strolling past the Blue Bottle bursting with groggy office workers and past the Mixt where lines of techies clad in Everlane, North Face, and Rothys queued up for overpriced salads.

It's no longer about any of these things. Rather, downtown San Francisco, like most large cities, feels like a scene from an apocalyptic movie. The proud lion sculptures on the entrance to Equinox are still there, but everyone else is gone — the entrepreneurs discussing the next round of funding, the tourists hopelessly searching for good lunch options in the urban jungle of fast-casual, and many of the businesses that used to serve the area's daily comings and goings.

Sure, yes, this reality is because of the pandemic. But even once vaccines are in our arms, will any of this neighborhood's past life come back?

It's a question worth asking. The physical workplace might be one of those everyday aspects of 2019 that may never return to the old normal — perhaps because it wasn't so great to begin with. In fact, Bay Area CEOs, co-working entrepreneurs, and real estate developers I've spoken with are certain that things will change. When local tech leaders such as Salesforce are [shouting "9 to 5 is dead" from the rooftops](#) — [and cutting down office spaces](#) — it's hard to argue otherwise.

But how exactly will things be different? Let's take a look:

**The office will only be for what it's best at**

“More than ever, employees control what they want from the experience, and what employees want is less time at the office,” says Anthony Rodio, CEO of [YourMechanic](#), an online platform for at-home car repairs, based in the South Bay with 50 employees.

YourMechanic closed their office in March. Since then, Rodio has switched the expansive, 8,000-square-foot office in Mountain View for a much smaller space in Burlingame more than half the original size, which suits a different set of needs. Instead of commuting to work daily, just to email and Slack people down the hallway, Rodio believes the post-Covid office will be visited primarily for things that “really matter” like “individual team meeting, sensitive performance evaluations, brainstorm, and meeting with clients.” The rest can be done from home.

“Questions about remote work have become one of the first interview questions employers encounter,” says Liza Mash, the founder of [Gable](#), a startup offering co-working opportunities at private homes around the Bay — an Airbnb for offices, if you will. “People will adopt a ‘remote first’ approach and the office as we know it will change dramatically.”

Gable launched in mid-2020 (it was in the works prior to the pandemic). The startup offers flexible drop-in options at other people’s homes, where work stations can take the form of a desk, a couch, or even spare rooms, all capitalizing on the notion that a workplace can mostly be about a change of scenery and not going insane in solitude rather than the traditional office environment.

“Teams will come together for bursts of collaboration and team building, but with varying frequency,” says Steve Mohebi, co-founder and president at [CANOPY](#), a small chain of co-working spaces in San Francisco and Silicon Valley. Let’s just say that justifying a schlep to the office in ways employees appreciate and find logical will be crucial to a company’s survival.

## **Forget ping-pong tables — ventilation and sanitation will be all the rage**

Bay Area tech culture used to be synonymous with lavish buffets, on-site entertainment (yes, the cliché ping-pong table is a staple) and endless snack bowls. The hand-sanitizing, socially distant perspective we have now, of course, makes all of this look rather ridiculous. The prime office assets in a post-Covid world? More like fresh air and proximity to the outdoors, plus everything that goes against the let's-huddle-together-like-a-bunch-of-frat-boys ethos of startups.

The winning office of tomorrow, says K. Cyrus Sanandaji, founder at [Presidio Bay Ventures](#), has “outdoor space, large intercommunicating stairs, modern mechanical equipment with enhanced filtration, touchless access controls.” Presidio Bay has a number of commercial and residential real estate projects sprawling from San Francisco through the Peninsula and South Bay, and they're already seeing renewed interest from startups.

What will the physical design of offices look like when we return? In the long run, says Sanandaji, open space will prevail: “the benefits of creative collaboration far outweigh the need for short-term isolation during the pandemic,” he says. “We're already learning about the challenges to creativity, productivity, and team cohesion as we continue working from home.” Having said that, additional attention may be given to the “flow” of the spaces; frictionless entry points and the ability to move through the office building freely, Sanandaji adds, will be a must.

In general, Sanandaji says the pandemic has led companies “to revisit their overall approach to the built environment and question the long-term viability and need for urban, high-rise, office space that forced proximity.”

A couple of other creative developments are also possible, such as a hybrid model of offices and apartments located in the same building, like [Springline](#), a project Presidio Bay is launching soon

in Menlo Park. In different Bay Area spots, hotels like the Park James (also in Menlo Park) and Napa's Embassy Suites are offering "workations" to rent out a room during the day to work (a trend that's already started); either way, working from home and popping to the office to use the strong Wi-Fi for a presentation is a viable scenario.

### **Just like schedules, leases will have to get flexible**

Currently, the office space YourMechanic is leasing is on a contract renewable every 90 days. This suits Rodio fine, at the moment. He prefers to remain flexible until, he says, "we'll get a clear directive that we can return to the office and not have to send everyone home again." The pandemic, with its rotating shutdowns and unpredictable variants, has made this outlook the norm: "This [reality] makes commercial real estate decisions on size and term exceedingly difficult to pin down," says Mohebi. "Hyper-flexibility will be vital in easing the transition back to the workplace."

The new crave for real estate flexibility might mean a new era of co-working spaces that are willing to accommodate companies that seek month-to-month bundle packages for employees on platforms like Gable, or, according to Mash, "subscription-based models, as companies will shift the physical presence to focus more on experiences." This goes hand in hand with the overall consensus that the days of the mandatory office are over. "The will is to pay only for usage, such as a pay-as-you-go model, and meeting in a space will be focused on collaboration, ideation, and connection," says Mash.

The overarching narrative of all of these speculative developments? Freedom. Freedom from contracts, from the commute, from needlessly warming a seat at a cubicle, and possibly, from the urban jungle itself, as palm-tree and fiddle fig-abundant as it may have been. Never thought work and freedom could mesh? The pandemic has a surprise for you, once again.